

Democracy – Part 1: Vox Populi Vox Dei?

A widespread false idea about how democracy works can be stated concisely as *Vox Populi Vox Dei* (the voice of The People is the voice of God). In other words, democracy is morally right because the majority defines what is right and the government must follow the will of The People™.

But in reality The People™ does not have a will. It is a group of individuals with conflicting aims and theories about the world, and ideas for what should be done. There are countless ways of notionally aggregating those aims and ideas into a single 'will'. Not only do these ways not agree, **all** of them are conceptually inconsistent and paradoxical.

Those who vote Conservative in an election in which Labour wins by a landslide will accept the result. But they will hardly do so because they agree that the Labour party, or The People, are right about what would be best for the country! Nor is the majority always right: majorities can, and frequently do, vote for mistaken policies like socialism, or for evil people like Hitler.

Furthermore, The People does not write laws; politicians write laws. Nor does The People enforce laws; the Police and the Courts do that.

So what role do The People play in democracy? Democracy ought not to be about who rules whom. As Karl Popper pointed out, political philosophers should not to answer the question 'Who should rule?' This question has no answer because human beings are fallible and so there is no way of designating a person or group as being the right ones to rule others. Popper suggested that instead we ought to ask 'How can we prevent those in charge from doing too much damage?' and democracy provides the best answer yet discovered to this question. The People get to vote every four years or so and on those occasions they may throw incompetent or malicious politicians out of office if they think somebody better is available. As Pericles of Athens (an advocate of the open society) once said: "Although only a few may originate policy, we are all able to judge it."

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First, recognize the individual right of every citizen in a democracy to participate in person. This is an individual responsibility which can not be deferred to those in power as some distant and passive trust of representation.

Second, use the faculties of reason to determine competence and act accordingly as individuals, not once every four years or so.

Third, let the citizen beware and be aware.

Fourth, speak your mind in public places, consider counterarguments, and act according to your considered will to strengthen this right.

Five, recognize that Democracy is only a state of imagination unless it understood in reason, principle, and personal action and is pursued relentlessly by every citizen.

by a reader on Mon, 01/03/2005 - 15:21 | [reply](#)

Please explain

Why democracy prevent's those in charge from doing too much damage. It seems to me that a monarch, for example, has more incentive to prevent damage to his country and it's citizens than an elected official. The monarch is in essence the "owner" of the government. The elected official is on a short term lease and has many incentives to treat the land and it's citizens as, well, rental property. The elected official can always blame the previous administration for the country's problems, the monarch cannot. The elected official may need to "scapegoat" certain minorities to become popular enough to be elected. These minorities could ethnic, economic, or religious. The monarch does not need to do this to aquire power.

by a reader on Wed, 01/05/2005 - 01:02 | [reply](#)

Re: Please explain

Thanks for the question. We have answered it [here](#).

by [Editor](#) on Mon, 01/10/2005 - 21:54 | [reply](#)

"But wait a minute, Dad; did you actually say 'Freedom?'"

The statement, "Vox populi, vox Dei," is about a great deal more than politics. Which is a lucky thing, because your politics are *atrocious*. Socialism is relegated to "mistaken policies?" Of course, I suppose all centralization is by nature oppressive. Nevermind

Northern European countries which shame our economic precariousness with their mixed economies, their "welfare capitalism." Who needs a budget surplus anyway? Socialist leanings are evil, regardless of the standard of living in many countries that incorporate it into that precious bastion: democracy. And let's make sure we put Socialists right next to Hitler, because that is a fair comparison.

Let's stop talking about democracy and start talking about what truly rules us: the free market. Kind of a misnomer, don't you think? **How free can we be if we are all slaves to the dollar?**

Allow me to quote an under-appreciated punk band that pretty much sums up my whole perspective of this site...

"So this is your Promised Land? Your deed is that gun in your hand."

by Jez on Tue, 01/25/2005 - 01:44 | [reply](#)